

Queensland Parliament Hansard Green


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SUBJECT: Member for Moggill, Courier-Mail

MEMBER: Dr FLEGG

Member for Moggill, Courier-Mail

 **Dr FLEGG** (Moggill—LNP) (11.29 am): Over a five-day period around 12 November 2012, the *Courier-Mail* ran a massive series of articles personally attacking me and my family totalling almost 10 pages of their paper. I intend to set the record straight today. Firstly, I make it clear that journalist Steve Wardill never once during that time contacted me to ensure a balanced report. A list of email subject lines alone—only the subject lines—was released by a disgruntled former staffer. The *Courier-Mail*, like me, had never, ever seen the content of most of those emails and just took public statements at face value.

On 14 November a full front-page photograph and article under the provocative headline 'How does this man keep his job?' alleged that I tabled incorrect documents despite the fact that they had never seen the content of those emails. Perhaps their motivations would be best understood by the reaction of journalist Steve Wardill in the media gallery witnessed by members of this House when I did the right thing, took one for the team and resigned—fist pumping as though his soccer team had scored a goal and backslapping and high fiving another journalist. It is impossible to imagine we could get any fair, balanced or truthful reporting in that environment.

Last year I told this House that I would seek the advice of the Integrity Commissioner and, if appropriate, make any corrections to my lobbyist register. I am pleased to say that it has not been found necessary to make any adjustment at all to the ministerial lobbying register, but this whole disgraceful episode raises some very serious issues. The 15 November follow-up article by Mr Wardill was a front-page article based on a leaked e-mail from that disgruntled former staffer in which Mr Wardill attacked my family by falsely claiming my son had improperly lobbied me. The *Courier-Mail* printed a doctored version of that e-mail, suggesting it had originated from my son when in fact it had originated from a principal of the lobbying firm in question. The correct version was printed in the Fairfax media thanks to the *Brisbane Times*. Why would the *Courier-Mail* have doctored the e-mail to give a false impression of access by my son? Beyond the attitude of Mr Wardill, it is important to note that the wife of the editor of the *Courier-Mail*, Madonna King, was in fact a business associate of the lobbying firm and its principal. It is no surprise that the *Courier-Mail* hid the e-mail's origin. The *Courier-Mail's* version of this e-mail was again doctored when the e-mail was produced as a court document. Imagine the lack of principles and ethics you would have as an editor to attack a young person and force them out of their job just to protect a business associate of your wife and cover up her connection to the lobbying firm. The Integrity Commissioner examined this e-mail which contained a CV that did not relate to any position available in the Department of Housing and Public Works. He advised that it was not an attempt to lobby by my son, and it did not require an adjustment to the lobbyist register. In fact, not a single senior public servant in my department was replaced. No surprise I neither opened nor remembered the e-mail.

Serious questions in relation to the *Courier-Mail's* willingness to be truthful and report fairly to the people of Queensland hang over numerous of their articles—in fact, too many to detail here—but I do note they even managed to position a large photograph of myself above an unrelated headline that said 'Paedophile cover-up'. Earlier the paper ran large articles about a property I own overseas and used the global resources of News Ltd to obtain international banking and property information. Rather than just reporting it, if in fact it was newsworthy at all, they made up a completely fictional story about a Mrs Miriam Cope, where the only word of truth in the store was that there is a Miriam Cope. At no point did they ever contact me as minister or my office to check any detail. They simply alleged that Mrs Cope, after decades of living in housing commission property, was being evicted and contrasted that to my investment property.

(Time expired)

Mr STEVENS: I move—

That the member be further heard.

Question put—That the motion be agreed to.

Motion agreed to.

Dr FLEGG: The truth was that Mrs Cope was not in an underoccupied dwelling and had not received any communication by phone or letter other than standard information sent to every housing commission tenant. This was simply a dishonest personal attack trying to accuse me of the heartless eviction of a poor tenant whilst being a property owner myself.

Perhaps one of the grubbiest articles produced by the *Courier-Mail* because it attacks a couple of young people trying to make the most of their lives who are not politicians or public figures was printed on just 2 April this year. The article was headed 'Flegg flags son's partner for award'. On close examination, the date contained in the article would make it clear that any nomination for recognition in relation to International Women's Day occurred well before any business relationship. Madam Speaker asked members to nominate a constituent known to us who demonstrated the hallmarks of a pioneering woman. The young woman in question clearly meets that to the highest degree and, whilst known to me, was not well known to me. For goodness sake, an acknowledgement on International Women's Day is a page 3 lead falsely implying some patronage or gain. They have got to be joking! Even more so the *Courier-Mail*'s assumption that because there is a family relationship with an independent adult family member, who was overseas at the time, and therefore all his business affairs would be known to me, that he would not be independent and that this was in some way improper is absurd. Case in point: the wife of the editor of the *Courier-Mail*. David Fagan's wife, Madonna King, for years presented the morning political program on Brisbane 612 ABC. Is it therefore to be considered, as the *Courier-Mail* have asserted in this article, that the editor of the *Courier-Mail* was privy to the inside workings of the ABC? A wife is clearly a much closer relationship than an independent adult son. It is very important to me to note that I raised my concerns about the *Courier-Mail*'s conduct in November 2012 at a very high level with News Ltd. I greatly appreciated the time given to me by Mr Kim Williams, and I have a very high regard for Mr Williams. However, the article on 2 April was obviously payback because I had made this complaint.

There has been no offer by the *Courier-Mail* to print any retraction on any of these issues. Following my further complaint in relation to the 2 April article, the *Courier-Mail*'s editor has offered to meet me. To this day I believe I did the right thing in stepping down, partly because the *Courier-Mail* was clearly going to continue its personal vilification without either being truthful or balanced and this was a serious distraction to the government. Being a minister is a great privilege and should be seen as service to our community and not as personal gain or prestige. I took responsibility for the circumstance and allowed the government to get on with the job. Whilst few people in Queensland have been subjected to the level of personal attack that I have, you could argue that it goes with the territory but what is not acceptable is the attacks on our families. They did not choose this avenue of community service. I am now absolutely focused on my constituents of Moggill, who have been badly let down by 20 years of Labor government, particularly in the area of transport. My new position on the backbench will leave me much more time and much freer to pursue realistic solutions, and I am sure the Minister for Transport and the Premier will get sick of hearing from me.

As a final note highlighting that readers of the *Courier-Mail* are not being presented with fair and accurate reporting, when Madam Speaker released her findings to parliament that there was no matter in relation to the lobbyists register to go to the Ethics Committee, despite having found 10 pages to write personal attacks, the *Courier-Mail* was not prepared to report it separately. It was buried as the last paragraph in a completely unrelated article about lobbyist Santo Santoro.

There is no hiding from the damaging impact these dishonest articles have had on me and my family. Honourable members should imagine how they would feel waking day after day with no warning to front page after front page, article after article—not reporting news but simply personal vilification.

(Time expired)